

Joe Smith, P. I.

Middle School Entry

Part One: The Biscuit Business

I hadn't been in the business long when I saw her, but I haven't set eyes on her equal since. When she darkened my door, held in the arms of a young man, I thought I was dreaming. It was love at first sight. She was as white as a cloud, light as a feather, and delicate as a butterfly.

In short, the best-looking biscuit I'd ever seen.

I would've snatched her right out of the man's arms and gobbled her up if there hadn't already been a bite taken out of her. Instead, I stayed cool and plotted to get the recipe.

"Mr. Smith," the man said, "I have a problem.

"Most people who see me do," I replied. "That's why they come." I gestured to the sign on my door. It read: Joe Smith, Pastry Investigator. "Now, what's wrong? The specimen you've got there seems to be just fine."

"I know," he said, agitated. "The rest of the batch has been stolen."

"Crumbly Croissants!" I cried. "Why didn't you lock them up?"

"I did," he said, looking wounded. "Don't you think I know the value of a good biscuit? I locked them in the pantry-I have the only key-and left them there this morning. When I came back to get one, nothing but crumbs remained."

This was truly a tale of woe. "Please don't get offended, Mr.-"

"Jones."

"Don't get offended, Mr. Jones, but it seems the obvious answer to your predicament is that you have mice."

“Mice!” he exclaimed, looking very offended indeed. “Mice! I’ll have you know, Mr. Smith, that I have neither seen a whisker nor heard a twitch during all the years I’ve lived in my house.”

Mice tend to be pretty quiet, but one of the first rules of being a pastry investigator is that you don’t argue with a client. I decided to move on. “Just how many biscuits were there in this batch?” I asked.

“Twelve,” he told me, “including this one. *It* was only saved because I took it out to eat and forgot about it.”

“Were there any windows in your pantry, Mr. Jones?” I was already hooked. I could never resist a good biscuit case. Plus, there was the matter of payment to consider.

“There was one,” he admitted, “but very small and extremely high up. No one could’ve reached the biscuits.”

“Well, they must have. They might have used some sort of device. It’s amazing what people will do for a well-made biscuit.”

“Please, Mr. Smith! Just tell me- can you help me or not?” Jones begged.

I thought it over. “I guess I can help you. Just one condition: You have to give me this recipe.”

“Why do you think I need them so badly? The recipe’s been stolen, too! Oh, my precious, precious biscuits...” Jones was becoming hysterical at the thought of losing his beautiful biscuits.

“Then it’ll be with the biscuits when we recover them. Now let’s go find them before they get stale.”

monotone, so that it sounded like, “Hey. Are. You.” It was actually pretty funny in the falsetto voice of the clerk. We looked over at her. She was clearly reading from a piece of paper.

“Oh come on. How is that supposed to fool us?” Jones asked disgustedly. “It’s clearly a blind planted by the crook.”

“They might be double-bluffing us,” I pointed out. “Maybe they really are in Smurple City. Can I see that piece of paper, miss?” I asked the clerk. She shook her head and tried to hide it. “The people who gave it to you might have said you would get hurt if you showed it to anyone, but we won’t let that happen.” She still wouldn’t give it to me, so I grabbed it out of her hand. It was blank! I turned it over. Not so much as a smudge. That could only mean one thing...

“You stole the biscuits!” I accused the clerk. “You must have stuck around to throw us off track. Didn’t you think we’d catch you? Gosh, I guess biscuit thieves can be dumb after all.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” she asked in the same falsetto, but this time I recognized the malicious undertones that were in the voice of the woman who had called with the ransom demand.

“I’ll watch her and get the biscuits. You call the police,” I told Jones, carefully keeping my eyes on the burglar. He went over to the pay phone and I said, “Okay, no fooling around. Give me the biscuits, and give them to me fast.”

She glared at me, but pulled out a burlap sack and handed it over. I held it close to my nose, breathing in that delicious flaky smell. There was no doubt about it—the biscuits were in there.

I, Joe Smith, Pastry Investigator, had done it again.

Part Two: The Almond Affair

I was at a party when a mystery struck. A party for the Allergic-to-Almonds Club.

This club consisted of a group of people who sat around eating almond-free things. I didn't quite get the point of it, but no matter. I was just there because an old friend of mine, Mrs. Flotsam, was hosting this meeting of the club, and she'd invited me. And, if you have a large group of people, chances are that *one* of them is having some pastry-related problem.

This was the part of the party when Mrs. Flotsam was supposed to be making something almond-free--although everyone knew her personal chef made it ahead of time--and the rest of the guests were mingling. I decided to do some mingling myself.

"Hello, sir," I said to a friendly-looking man.

"Hi, sonny," he replied.

Sonny! This man couldn't have been more than five years my senior! I wanted to punch him, but a pastry investigator always keeps their cool. So instead of kneading him up like bread dough, I smiled and said, "I'm Joe Smith."

"John Aldman," he told me, and we shook hands. "I'm a new member of this club, my wife and I both. I'm not actually allergic to almonds, but my wife wanted me to join. Are you allergic?"

"Nope," I said. "I don't even belong to this club. I'm a pastry investigator. Perhaps you've heard of my involvement with the Jones biscuits?"

“Oh, yes!” she said, brightening. “What a good *idea!* *Thank* you, Mr. Smith.” She bustled off, leaving me alone.

I went out to the dining room. “Folks, Mrs. Flotsam’s getting you some medicine. Just hold out until she comes out, okay?”

Their responses were too garbled to be made out, but I’m sure it was a positive response. Who could say no to Joe Smith, Pastry Investigator?

“Here it is!” Mrs. Flotsam said, emerging triumphantly from upstairs holding a big bottle. “I *think* I have enough for everyone.” While medication was being doled out, she added, “Sorry about the mix-up, I don’t know what’s gotten into Molly lately. My chef,” she explained in response to my confused glance.

The guests, grumbling, took the medicine and left quickly, leaving me alone with Mrs. Flotsam.

“So,” I said, getting right down to business, “You didn’t tell your chef to put almonds in this cake?”

“Oh, no. Like I said, I don’t know what’s gotten in to her. She forgot to send an invitation to the Aldmans—she’s my secretary, too, and my gardener—and I had to call them up myself! And now this! I might have to dismiss her.”

I was beginning to see a possible solution to this case. “Is it possible, Mrs. Flotsam, that when you told your gardener-secretary-cook to invite the Aldmans to the party, that you said, ‘Be sure to add the Aldmans to the party,’ or something like that? And that she thought you said *almonds?*”

Mrs. Flotsam’s worried face broke into a smile. “Why, that’s right! I did say something similar to that! And I remember she gave me a strange look and said, ‘Are

you sure?’ Of course! Thank you so much, Mr. Smith! I’m glad that mystery’s been cleared up.”

I returned home, satisfied that the case had been solved and I had gotten the rest of the almond cakes as a thank-you from Mrs. Flotsam. I was savoring my very first bite when I got the call. I almost didn’t answer, but I sighed and picked up the phone, crossing my fingers that it wasn’t a telemarketer.

It was Mrs. Flotsam, almost hysterical. “My *jewelry* has been *stolen*! Mr. Smith, you’ve *got* to find out who’s *done* it!”

I groaned. “You’re forgetting, Mrs. Flotsam. I’m a *Pastry* Investigator.”

“Please, Joe? *Please*? You were so much help earlier...”

“Fine,” I grumbled. “I’ll be right over.”

When I arrived at the Flotsam mansion for the second time that day, Mrs. Flotsam welcomed me inside.

She showed me her jewelry box. It seemed pretty full to me, but apparently it was shockingly empty. “Almost half of my jewelry is *gone*!” she wailed. “Who could have *done* it?”

“I hate to say it, Mrs. Flotsam, but it seems the obvious suspect is your cook-gardener-secretary. She could have put the almonds into the cake and then used the upset as a chance to steal your jewelry.”

“I *thought* of that,” she said, surprising me—she had never seemed much like the *thinking* type to me— “but she *left* at noon for her day off! She went to spend time with her *grandchildren*.”

